

world

Japan police investigate cause of blast in Sapporo

● Large blast and fire wrecked a restaurant in Sapporo

● Officials warned that the number of injured could rise

AFP | Tokyo

Japanese police were investigating yesterday the cause of a powerful blast that ripped through a restaurant in the country's north overnight, injuring 42 people and damaging surrounding buildings.

The explosion in the city of Sapporo on Sunday night started fires and caused the partial collapse of some neighbouring buildings, forcing dozens of residents into shelters, officials said.

The cause of the blast was still under investigation, police said, but there were reports that it may have been a gas leak.

Some reports said fumes were leaking from spray cans that had been collected for disposal at a real estate company in the building.

But investigators were also looking into at least nine propane tanks installed in the building for the various businesses located inside.



Firefighters attend the scene in Sapporo

Numerous customers at the restaurant on the building's first floor said they smelled gas at the time of the explosion, Kyodo News agency reported.

The blast produced large flames and sent plumes of smoke rising in the night air, with witnesses describing a terrifying boom.

The two-story wooden building, which also housed a clinic, was seriously damaged, a Sapporo fire department official told AFP.

Police said 42 people had been injured, but there were no fatalities.

42
people were injured and surrounding buildings were damaged by the blast

Among the injured were several children, as well as a man who suffered burns and a woman who jumped from the building to escape, breaking her leg in the process.

"There was an enormous sound, 'bang', then when I looked up at the sky it was filled with plumes of smoke," an elderly woman said in footage on public broadcaster NHK.

"The ceiling fell, then the entire second floor collapsed and we were all stuck. We managed

to escape after everyone kicked through the wall," a person who was in the restaurant at the time told Kyodo.

The fire from the blast spread to neighbouring buildings, and debris blasted out by the explosion shattered the windows of nearby apartments and restaurants, according to local reports.

"We are investigating details about the damage together with police at the scene," the fire department official said.

The blast happened around 8.30 pm (1130 GMT), and the city government opened a shelter to house dozens of people whose homes were damaged.

The explosion also caused a temporary black-out, with 250 buildings losing electricity, but power was later restored, he said.

The three tenants in the building were poorly prepared for possible fires, Sapporo fire department official Takashi Shida told AFP.

"We instructed them to improve these points during an on-site inspection in October but they had not made progress," he said.

Many small and medium-sized older buildings in Japan are built partly or entirely from wood and are vulnerable to fires.

Erdogan vows to 'remove' Kurd militia east of Euphrates



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan addresses his supporters in Konya, Turkey

AFP | Ankara

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday vowed Turkey would remove a Kurdish militia viewed as terrorists by Ankara from northern Syria if the US failed to ensure fighters leave the east of the Euphrates.

The threat comes after Erdogan spoke on the phone with US President Donald Trump on Friday when the pair agreed to ensure "more effective coordination" between their countries' operations in Syria.

The conversation followed threats from Erdogan last week to launch an offensive against the US-backed Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia east of the Euphrates River, where there are American troops, within the "next few days".

"I spoke with Trump. The terrorists must leave the east of the Euphrates. If they don't go, we will remove them," Erdogan promised during a televised speech in the central Turkish province of Konya.

Wife of detained China activist goes bald



Yuan Shanshan, left, Liu Ermin, Wang Qiaoling and Li Wenzu pose shaved their heads to protest the detention of their husbands, detained during the so-called 709 crackdown

AFP | Beijing

The wife of a detained Chinese lawyer and three supporters shaved their heads yesterday and attempted to submit to a Beijing court a petition protesting her husband's indefinite detention.

The four women went to the Hongsecun People's High Court in south Beijing in a symbolic protest against what they said highlighted the "lawlessness" of the country.

"We can go bald, but the country cannot be lawless," the four women shouted outside

the courthouse after they were prevented by police from entering the premises.

The Chinese words for being completely bald and having a state of lawlessness -- "wufa" -- are homonyms.

Their husbands were all targeted during a sweeping crackdown on activists and lawyers on July 9, 2015.

Attorney Wang Quanzhang, who defended political activists and victims of land seizures, disappeared in the sweep aimed at courtroom critics of Communist authorities.

Charged in January 2016 with

alleged "subversion of state power", Wang is the only one of over 200 lawyers and activists arrested in the so-called "709 crackdown" who is yet to be tried or released.

"My husband is being detained incommunicado without a proper explanation," his wife Li Wenzu told AFP.

"I want answers as to why the authorities aren't following due process. I want to know why they aren't allowing the family's lawyer to visit Wang," she said.

Li said over the past three years she has submitted over 30 freedom of information requests

to police, which have been sent back unanswered.

In April, Li attempted to march 100 kilometres (60 miles) to a detention facility in neighbouring Tianjin to highlight her husband's plight before she was thwarted by police.

"I want to urge the Supreme People's Court to perform its supervisory duties and investigate why the second intermediate court in Tianjin that is handling my husband's case is dragging its feet," Li said.

"The court has surpassed the time limit prescribed by law for dealing with such cases," she said.

Health concerns

Liu Ermin, wife of rights activist Zhai Yanmin, said she was protesting her husband's torture while in detention.

"His health has deteriorated and we are still under constant surveillance," she said.

The third woman was Yuan Shanshan, wife of lawyer Xie Yanyi.

Xie, who defended practitioners of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, was released on bail pending trial in January 2017. He has since shed light on the torture of detained lawyers.

Thailand seizes 18 million meth pills



Attempts to crack down the methamphetamine trade in Thailand have resulted in massive seizures and left at least 15 alleged smugglers shot dead in the country's north since the start of November

AFP | Bangkok

Thai authorities seized more than 18 million meth pills in the drug-riddled "Golden Triangle", a senior military official said yesterday, following deadly anti-trafficking operations in the border region.

The Golden Triangle -- a lawless wedge of land intersecting China, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos -- is the main base of operations for Southeast Asia's highly lucrative methamphetamine trade.

Attempts to crack down on the drug's influx into Thai-

land have resulted in massive seizures and left at least 15 alleged smugglers shot dead in the country's north since the start of November.

The latest bust occurred in Chiang Rai province on Sunday night after authorities received a tip-off that smugglers were active in the area, later pinpointing two suspicious cars.

"We found and seized bags... all were methamphetamine, about 18.76 million pills," commander Vichit Wongsang said in a press conference streamed live on Facebook.